



Connecticut Family Learning Initiative

A project of the
Connecticut State
Department of Education

Research Brief

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Listening to Families: The Family Learning Outreach Study

Key Findings:

- ❖ Virtually all parents, regardless of income, believe parent involvement and family learning activities are “very important” in helping children and families succeed.
- ❖ Lower-income parents are more likely than parents in general to say that some parents who want to be actively involved in their children’s education lack the skills to do so.
- ❖ When it comes to delivering family learning messages, parents perceive teachers, child care providers and librarians as very believable.
- ❖ Faith leaders are more believable to lower-income parents. School administrators are more believable to parents in general than to lower-income parents.
- ❖ The most effective messages reflect themes of strong families, quality time, a lot of fun, good jobs and success.
- ❖ There are parent-professional gaps in their perceptions of frequency of home learning activities, credible messengers and effective messages.

The Family Learning Outreach Study increases our understanding of how to promote greater parent involvement in family literacy and learning activities. Previous research indicates that increasing family learning opportunities in the home and community is a powerful way to improve student achievement and family success. This study applies social marketing research techniques to identify the most effective messages and messengers for encouraging greater parent involvement in learning activities. Survey and interview findings from Connecticut parents and educators are being used to develop pilot demonstration projects in Meriden and Stratford to create *family learning communities*. These projects will train professionals in a variety of organizations, disseminate materials throughout the community, and develop collaborative relationships between libraries, schools, early childhood programs, faith organizations and other agencies to ensure that families get consistent messages about the importance of family learning from a variety of sources, and know where to go to learn more.

Introduction

The seeds of the achievement gap are sown long before children reach schools. Children’s earliest experiences are critical to the development of the skills necessary for keeping pace in school. Thus, it is essential that families of young children have the information and tools to harness the power of the home to support learning. Parents want children to succeed, but many parents—especially families too often on the wrong side of the achievement gap: low-income families, low-literate families, language minorities, African American and Hispanic families—do not feel they have the information they need to make a difference. The Family Learning Outreach Study seeks to determine the most effective messages and messengers for encouraging greater parent involvement in learning activities, and use them to weave a coordinated community response.

Family learning is an essential strategy for reversing Connecticut’s widening achievement gap. Opportunities for family learning exist in all families and occur naturally during daily routines. They include communicating through writing, drawing, telling stories and conversation. Family learning activities help children learn to read, write and think critically, as well as develop a sense of inquiry, self-confidence,

achievement, and hope. Adults gain skills that enable them to get and keep good jobs, tackle critical life tasks from reading prescriptions to filling out job applications, and better support children’s growth and learning.

The day-to-day activities that create the foundation for family learning are present in every home. However, the key that unlocks the power of family learning lies in discovering how to maximize these activities for learning. Families of all types can incorporate family learning into their normal daily activities, and there is ample evidence that this supports student achievement particularly when the activities are interesting to children (Dunst, 2000; Gadsden, 2000; Wasik, Dobbins, & Herrmann, 2001).

The difficulty lies in determining how best to provide families the information to improve their chances of reaching not just basic goals, but lifelong aspirations. When the importance of family learning is made apparent, every family can recognize and exercise the power of ordinary events to take advantage of a wide range of everyday moments that provide rich opportunities for multigenerational learning.

Research Questions

This study is being conducted in two phases—phase one focuses on basic research and phase two uses research results in a pilot study in two local communities. The primary research questions guiding the study are: *Do parents value their role in their child's education? Who are the best messengers and what are the most effective messages to promote family literacy and learning among low-income families? And, do educators and parents perceive family learning differently?* In phase two, the Implementation Pilot will help us understand how to use the research results to craft effective strategies state and local leaders can use to promote family learning.

Research Results

◆ Parents Value Education

Research conducted by the Family Learning Outreach Study confirms national reports that a vast majority of parents feel that greater involvement in their children's education is critically important (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Henderson & Berla, 1995). Virtually all parents of young children, regardless of income, said that involving themselves in children's education, and frequently reading to their children are both "very important" to helping families succeed.

Although parents value involvement in their children's education, national research persistently shows that many parents do not have the information they need to effectively support children's learning. A recent national survey showed not only a lack of accurate child development information among parents, but also significant areas of misinformation. That study overwhelmingly indicates that adults need more and better information, delivered in more accessible ways (Zero to Three, 2000). Not surprisingly, the Family Learning Outreach Study revealed that Connecticut parents, particularly lower-income parents, believe that although they would like to be involved in children's education, some parents lack the skills. Lower-income parents were far more likely than parents as a whole to think that adult education in job training and life skills, English as a second language education for parents, and preschool opportunities for all children are very important to helping families succeed.

Do Parents Value Education?

Rated as "Very Important"	Lower-Income Parents	Statewide Parents
Parents frequently spend time reading to kids	98%	98%
Parent involvement in their child's education	94%	93%
Even though parents may want to be actively involved in their children's education, some lack the skills to do so ("strongly agree")	56% *	41%
Opportunities for all children to go to pre-school	93% *	62%
Adult education in job training and life skills	91% *	56%
English as a Second Language education for parents	81% *	51%

* Denotes a statistically significant difference between parent groups

◆ Credible Messengers

Parents see those in direct contact with children as the most credible messengers. In particular, classroom teachers, child care providers and librarians are seen as the most important sources of information about education and learning. Lower-income parents also see members of the faith community as believable messengers, but are less likely than parents in general to regard principals and other school administrators as highly credible.

Effective Messengers

Rated as "Very Believable"	Lower-Income Parents	Statewide Parents
Teachers, child care providers and educators	70%	79%
Librarians	65%	64%
Religious leaders (e.g., priest, minister or rabbi)	47% *	31%
Principals and school administrators	49% *	61%

*Denotes a statistically significant difference between parent groups.

◆ Effective Messages

This research suggests that some messages are more persuasive than others. The most effective messages remind parents that family learning helps make families stronger; allows parents to spend quality time with their children; helps students do better in school and have a better chance of getting good jobs as adults; and is fun. Lower-income parents also gave high ratings to the following messages: as parents improve their own skills, they are more likely to get good jobs that pay better; and good parents make sure children take advantage of as many family learning activities as they can so they learn more. Messages that were not effective all had a negative tenor. The less effective messages were: if children are not involved in family learning activities they will fall behind; children involved in family learning are less likely to get into trouble; and family learning activities can help move families out of poverty.

◆ Parent-Professional Gaps

Surveys of professionals including elementary and early childhood educators, school administrators, and school and community librarians revealed interesting differences in perceptions of family learning practices, effective messages and credible messengers, particularly compared with responses of lower-income parents. For example, 56 percent of lower-income parents reported reading to their children on a daily basis. Only 25 percent of professionals said this activity

Effective Messages

Messages rated “much more likely” to make parents participate in reading or other family learning activities	Lower-Income Parents	Statewide Parents
Helps parents and children learn together and that helps makes families stronger	89%	75%
Is a great way for parents to spend quality time with their kids	88%	78%
Better readers make better students who succeed in school and have a better chance of getting good jobs as adults	86%	81%
Can be a lot of fun for children	83% **	71%
As parents improve their own reading and learning skills they are more likely to get good jobs that pay better	80% **	63% *
Is something a good parent makes sure that his or her child takes advantage of so that they will learn more	79% **	63% *
Is critical for children to be successful in the future	77%	75%

* Only marginally effective with statewide parents.

** Professionals do not believe that parents see this as an effective message.

actually takes place. An even larger gap was seen in other literacy related activities such as telling stories, singing or drawing. While 43 percent of parents reported engaging in these activities with their child every day, only 6 percent of professionals believe these activities take place daily.

Perhaps there is a social desirability bias in parent reports. Parents may inflate their reports, knowing they should engage in such practices regularly. On the other hand, professionals have only a glimpse into family life and may not see the full extent of involvement. More importantly, if parents perceive themselves as trying to help children, but professionals do not, parents may sense negativity that will likely harm relationships and communication.

In addition to parent-professional differences on family learning practices, this research revealed differences in ratings for effective messages. Professionals were asked to rate the messages they thought the parents they work with would find most effective. Professionals gave particularly low ratings to messages emphasizing family learning as fun, connected to good jobs and something a good parent does. However parents, particularly lower-income parents thought these messages were very effective. This reveals another gap in understanding that limits the effectiveness of professionals in reaching out to families.

In terms of effective messengers, professionals and parents agreed that classroom teachers and child care providers are credible. Professionals gave higher marks to principals and school administrators, and much lower marks to librarians than did parents. Thus librarians have more credibility with parents than they and other professionals are aware.

Parents—Professional Gaps

“...about how often do you or another adult in your household...”	% Responding “Every Day”		
	Lower-Income Parents	Statewide Parents	Professionals
Read out loud to your child	56% *	81%	25% **
Tell stories, sing, draw or do arts and crafts or participate in similar kinds of activities	43% *	70%	6% **

* Denotes a statistically significant difference between parent groups.

** Denotes a statistically significant difference between parents and professionals.

Conclusions

To be most effective, professionals must recognize that their perceptions underestimate parent beliefs. Regardless of the accuracy of either group’s perceptions, understanding that parents view themselves as engaged and recognize that more engagement is necessary will help professionals more effectively promote family learning. Messages about strengthening families and creating enjoyable experiences, delivered by educators, librarians and faith leaders, will be most influential in promoting family learning.

Sample and Methods

The findings reported here are based on surveys of over 1,600 parents and professionals. An on-site intercept survey, along with a telephone survey, in targeted urban communities was used to complete 450 surveys of lower-income parents with children ages 8 and under. A statewide telephone survey was conducted of 500 Connecticut parents of children ages 8 and under, using a random dialing methodology. A quota system was used to ensure appropriate regional and gender representation of the final sample. A mail survey of professionals was conducted using a list created by the State Department of Education. This list of professionals able to promote family learning activities included elementary teachers and administrators, child care providers, children’s librarians, Family Resource Centers, adult education programs, and Head Start and Even Start programs.

Responses were received from 676 professionals representing schools (68%), libraries (18%), Family Resource Centers (6%) and other settings (9%). Of the professionals responding, 32% said they were employed as teachers, 22% as administrators and 46% as librarians or other professionals.

The margin of sample error varies by sub-group. The sample of parents and providers has a sampling error of +/- 5 percentage points at the 95th percent level of confidence. This means that there is about one chance in twenty that the results of a survey of this size would differ by more than 5 percentage points in either direction from the results that would be obtained if all parents in Connecticut or all educators had been interviewed. The margin of sampling error for lower income parents is approximately +/- 6%.

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Using the Findings: The Implementation Pilot Project

The Family Learning Outreach Study broadly seeks to learn how best to help professionals and parents harness the power of home life to support learning. The research phase of the study employed surveys to determine the most effective messages and messengers, and to better understand the perceptions of families and professionals that impact message delivery. The goal of the current implementation phase of the study is to employ the findings of that research to learn how best to create *family learning communities*, that is communities that work in concert to promote and support family learning activities. **Stratford** and **Meriden** were chosen as pilot communities because of their experience with family literacy programs, the existence of a local structure for carrying out the project, and a previously locally identified need to promote family learning. These two communities will test strategies for working as a community to promote increased family learning activities in order to create conditions for generations of success.

Families in the research phase of the study reported that classroom teachers, including early childhood providers, are the most trusted source of family learning and literacy information. The Implementation Pilot Project provides training and materials to assist teachers in the two communities in their role as family learning messengers. The study also revealed, however, that school is only one key leverage point. To reach disenfranchised families that may be reluctant to reach out to schools, the Implementation Pilot will also assist other important messengers in each community including librarians and faith leaders.

In order to maximize the impact of the outreach effort, a broad range of human service providers and community members, beyond the key messengers also will be recruited to take part in the project

The messages revealed to be most effective were used as a starting point for development of a new persuasion brochure, which will be distributed widely through schools, libraries and other stakeholders. The implementation phase will track the number of families reached via this brochure against the return rate of completed activity cards attached to the brochure. Incentive for return is a family learning kit, which includes a certificate of accomplishment and free children's book. The response rate will provide an initial indication of family engagement and serve as a baseline for future measurement as modifications and revisions to the program are made. In addition, in the target areas, a second intercept survey of parents with children under 8 will provide tracking data from the earlier baseline research, as well as quantitative assessment of how effectively the communication engaged parents.

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Goal 1: Engage a network of stakeholders in pilot communities.

In order to leverage existing community resources and promote buy-in from key community stakeholders, the Study will use a *middle-out* strategy. Unlike strictly top-down or bottom-up approaches, this project will harness the strengths of community resources while simultaneously accessing power structures to mobilize stakeholders across a community. This strategy has the advantage of promoting consistent messages from many community sources that are part of families' lives.

Goal 2: Train community providers in parent engagement and family learning.

Training will focus on deepening professionals understanding of family learning and community outreach using materials developed by this study. Professionals must understand the importance parents already place on family learning, and how much they feel they already do. To more effectively deliver family learning messages, professionals must better understand parents' existing beliefs and how best to build on them.

Goal 3: Increase family learning practices through planned outreach to families.

This project is designed to ultimately increase family learning activities in the target communities using those messengers that were identified as most credible to deliver the most effective messages. A systemic outreach effort will be conducted to both support parents' existing beliefs about the importance of their efforts, and to build greater levels of commitment and participation.



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